DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 048 732 EM 008 772

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TITLE An Investigation into Children's Perception of the Attractiveness and Credibility of TV Commercials.
INSTITUTION Northern Illinois Univ., De Kalb.
PUB DATE 71
NOTE 9p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association for Educational Communications and Technology (Philadelphia, Pa., March 22-26, 1971)

EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Age Differences, Attitude Tests, *Childhood Attitudes, *Individual Differences, Sex Differences, *Television Commercials, *Television Research

ABSTRACT

Children's attitudes toward television commercials were investigated. Specifically, the study was designed to determine if children like commercials they perceive as real, or believe commercials that they like. Preferences for certain types of commercials which might emerge from age, grade, or sex groupings were also investigated. The study describes the test instrument used and discusses the results. Four principal conclusions were reached. Children tend to believe in the commercials they like and like the commercials they believe. Younger children tend to like commercials more than older children do. Girls tend to like and believe commercials more than boys do. And finally, children are capable of making selective value judgments about the cleverness, happiness, truth, and reality of the message. (Author/JK)

ED048732

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AN INVESTIGATION INTO CHILDREN'S PERCEPTION OF THE ATTRACTIVENESS AND CREDIBILITY OF TV COMMERCIALS

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Purpose.

The effects of television on children have been a subject of research for many years. The two classic studies are by Himmelweit in England, and Schramm in this country.[1,2] Most studies have been of the broad survey type as exemplified by the work of Steiner,[3] or of an eclectic and speculative nature.[4,5]

The intent of this study was to provide information on a narrow area of interest: the child's attitude to the TV commercial. The specific purpose of the study was to investigate if children like commercials which they perceive as real, or believe commercials that they like. To accomplish this two dimensions of credibility and likeability were established. These were each operationally defined as the sums of two three-point scales described under The Instrument (page 3). A secondary purpose was to investigate any preferences to type of commercial, and to determine any patterns of preference which might emerge from age, grade or sex groupings. The success of Sesame Street with its commercial-like messages has made this type of inquiry particularly relevant to the field of instructional technology.

Procedure.

Four thirty-second commercials were videotaped and prepared for replay in the classroom. The method of selection was random in so far as the commercials were recorded off-the-air at approximately hourly intervals. Commercials obtained by this procedure were: Alka-Seltzer, One-A-Day Multiple Vitamin, Folger's Coffee and Quickie Roller.

The site of the experiment was the learning center of the Lincoln Elementary School in DeKalb, Illinois. Two sections of each grade from grade two to grade five, with approximately 25 in each section, provided the experimental population. Total n was 196 with 106 boys and 90 girls. The range in age was from 7 to 12. Age and sex were not significantly correlated $r = .03$ ($p = .626$).

The procedure of showing the commercials and gathering the responses was identical for each group and was accomplished in the same afternoon. Each class would file in and be seated at a set of tables. The learning center supervisor then gave the students a standardized list of instructions regarding what was required of them.

The standard instruction ran: "Students, we need your help to find out what you think of television commercials. Please check your answer with an X. For example, if you think the commercial is True, check the True box. If it is false, check the False box. If you don't know, check the 'I don't know' box. There is no right or wrong answer." The same teacher remained for all the replays and assisted any student who appeared as if he or she did not understand the operation, or who requested assistance.

The commercials were viewed from a 23-inch monochrome Sony receiver. The audio and video were of uniform high quality for the successive presentations.

The Test Instrument.

The test instrument consisted of four pages, numbered and color coded-one for each commercial. The respondents were asked to make an X to indicate their preference on six scales immediately after viewing each commercial.

The scales were:

A.	True	I don't know	False
B.	Happy	"	Not happy
C.	Real	"	Not real
D.	Stupid	"	Smart
E.	Nice	"	Not nice
F.	Good	"	Bad

The forms "not happy" and "not real" were chosen as these were found to be more clear than "unhappy" and "unreal" to the younger children. The scale stupid-smart was chosen to check for left-right bias, to see if students showed a response bias for left or right. The results indicated that the children paid attention to each scale individually, and did not show response bias. (See Results, 6.)

Assuming the scale produced interval data, each scale was coded from one to three in value as follows:

1	2	3
False	I don't know	True
Not happy	I don't know	Happy
Not real	I don't know	Real
Smart	I don't know	Stupid
Not nice	I don't know	Nice
Bad	I don't know	Good

The Credibility dimension was found by summing the scores of scales A and C (Real and True). An adequate justification for this procedure was provided by the Pearson correlation r = .61 ($p < .002$) between the Real and True scales. Similarly, the likeability dimension was found from the sum of the scores of scales E and F (Nice and Good). Again adequate reliability for this procedure was provided by the Pearson correlation r = .63 ($p < .002$) between these two scales.

Procedure.

A dichotomy was forced by dividing those respondents who marked a score higher than sixteen (the mean) on the likeability dimension, from those who scored less than sixteen on the credibility dimension. (With four commercials the lowest possible score is 8 and the highest is 24.)

Thus, a two by two frequency table is generated with dichotomous groups which may be called Like-Not like and Believe-Not believe. Because an underlying continuity is assumed, the phi coefficient is appropriate. (See Table 1.)

Results and Discussion.

1. Credibility and Likeability were found to be positively correlated r = .26 ($p < .002$) for a two tailed test of significance.[6] This indicated that the two dimensions are related although the size of the correlation did not augur well for prediction. Whether or not the students like what they believe or believe what they like is not supported by the correlation, as causality is not determined by correlation.
2. Frequency table comparison for high and low scorers on both the credibility and likeability dimensions revealed a positive relationship between

credibility and likeability. A phi coefficient of 0.23 was obtained ($p < .01$). It is perhaps most significant that this table reveals that most of the children like and believe television commercials.

TABLE 1

COMPARISON OF FREQUENCIES FOR BOTH HIGH AND LOW SCORERS ON THE CREDIBILITY AND LIKEABILITY DIMENSIONS

	Not Like	Like	Row Total
Don't Believe	8 4.7%	28 16.3%	36
Believe	6 3.5%	130 75.6%	136
Column Total	14	158	172

PHI = 0.23 $p < .01$

Corrected Chi Square = 9.81 with 1 D/F

3. Likeability and age were negatively correlated $r = -.17$ ($p = .016$). An increase in age was shown to be related to a corresponding decrease in the numbers of students liking the commercials.
4. There was no significant correlation between credibility and age $r = .04$ ($p = .52$). An increase in age was not shown to be accompanied by an increase in the numbers of students believing commercials.

5. Credibility was significantly correlated with sex r = .15 (p = .03). The girls felt that the commercials were more credible than did the boys.
6. Likeability was significantly correlated with sex r = .23 (p = .002). Again, the girls felt that the commercials were more likeable than did the boys.
7. The children responded to each commercial individually, i.e., response patterns did differ from one commercial to the next. For example, they exhibited different responses to Alka-Seltzer and One-A-Day. The Alka-Seltzer commercial which portrayed the trials of making a commercial about meat balls was tongue-in-cheek. 63 said this commercial was smart, 49 did not know, while 84 said it was stupid. However, for One-A-Day Vitamins (which pictured a child in a raincoat receiving parental care), 134 checked Smart, 35 didn't know, and 27 checked the Stupid box. As an example to demonstrate the selectivity of the children, the Alka-Seltzer commercial was well liked, although 84 students checked it as stupid. In fact, compared with One-A-Day with 159, it ranked second, with 144 checking the "Good" box. This (compared with 121 for Coffee and 127 for Quickie Roller) showed that a relatively large number thought it was "good," even though it was relatively "stupid".
8. Contingency table comparison of all four commercials on each of the six scales gave more detailed evidence of the children's willingness to make selective judgments between commercials, and to differentiate between the qualities of each commercial individually. Out of the

36 possible comparisons, 22 were significantly different at the 5% level (Chi square> 5.99 at 2 df), and 19 comparisons exceeded a chi square value of 12.12 ($p < .001$).

Further inspection of the data revealed patterns that one might expect from a literal interpretation of the messages. One such example was the comparison between Alka-Seltzer and Folger's Coffee. There was no significant difference between the commercials on the True or Stupid scales, but the trials portrayed on the Alka-Seltzer commercial caused a low of 105 checks on the Happy scale compared with the 178 checks gained by Mrs. Olsen, the protagonist of Folger's Coffee.

Conclusions

1. Children tend to believe in the commercials they like, and like the commercials they believe in.
2. Children are capable of making selective value judgments about the cleverness, happiness, truth and reality of the messages.
3. Children respond differently to different commercials.
4. The younger children tend to like commercials more than the older children do.
5. Girls tend to like and believe commercials more than the boys do.

Footnotes.

[1]Hilde T. Himmelweit, Television and the Child (London: Oxford University Press, 1961).

[2]Wilbur Schramm, Television in the Lives of Our Children (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 1961).

[3]Gary A. Steiner, The People Look at Television (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 79.

[4]Sylvia Sunderlin and Nan Gray, Children and TV, Television's Impact on the Child, Bulletin 21A, Assn. for Childhood Education International, 3615 Wisconsin Ave. N.W., Washington D.C. 20016. ERIC abstract ED 013666.

[5]Harry J. Skornia, Television and Society (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. 159.

[6]All tests of significance were two-tailed tests.